

The Global Gym

Melissa Tandiwe Myambo

I foolishly decided to try and walk back to the flat instead of flagging a taxi. Really, it would have been much easier to just jump into one of the new white metered taxis that were a big improvement on the ramshackle black and white cabs with their distended transmissions. But...I could see the sharp outlines of the pyramids jutting into a pale sky clear of the polluted haze that often smudges the horizon. Plus, I was feeling buoyant. I had just finished some endorphin-evoking classes at Gold's gym.

The morning had started with a class called "Fitness Zone," fun cardio and strength-training drills set to the latest, not so great Top 40 hits of 2010. The pulsating music was formatted, like most professionally produced aerobics music, to an even 32 counts which is why it weighs on the eardrum after a while. Halfway through the class, there was the usual squabble about the air conditioning between the lady who always thought it was too cold and the lady who always thought it was too hot (she was fully clad from head to toe so that only her face and hands showed). And of course, the over-achiever lady - there's one in nearly every class - impatiently began doing jumping jacks and frantic squats to keep her heart rate from falling as the brave instructor tried to mediate the quarrel.

Abs class was much calmer as everyone gratefully lunged for a mat and collapsed onto the floor for a million boring but supposedly effective abdominal crunches and then finally, it was time for zumba, the “international dance-fitness party”! The petite Portuguese-Angolan instructor, Eli, removed her sweatshirt to reveal her low-slung tie-dye cargo pants and a matching gray sports bra, ZUMBA scrawled across both of them. A plump lady next to me smiled and shook her head in a combination of good-natured envy and admiration as she simultaneously readjusted her pink hegab, “Eli is perfect. She is 100% perfect!”

Zumba is not a “ladies only” class like belly dancing so she did not remove her hegab.

The music started. Salsa, samba, bhangra, bachata, merengue, hip hop, cumbia, reggaeton...“Shake, shimmy, be sexy,” that’s the zumba mantra, and almost two dozen of us peered at Eli’s mirror reflection as we tried to reproduce her beguiling gyrations. A sheen of perspiration made her skin glisten so that her abdominal and arm muscles seemed to ripple. Soon, the plump lady’s cheeks were rosier. One index finger slipped under her matching pink turtleneck but she didn’t stop twirling, stomping, jumping and clapping.

“Thank you, Eli!” said the forty-something man who was one of two regular male participants. The plump lady was gulping down water but she waved at Eli and

said, "Merci. A la prochaine." I thanked Eli in Portuguese and then asked her if she was going to come salsa dancing that evening on the Nile Maxim.

It was on my way out of the gym that I decided I should walk. There was a wintry chill in the desert air but the sun was shining. Why not walk?

"Shukran. Ma'salemma," I said to, curly-haired Ahmed, one of the receptionists, his elbows resting on the front desk as he chatted with the Czech lady who had time to kill before she had to pick up her girls from the Canadian International School. "Ma'salemma, ba-bye," he said, waving. I got into the dusty, door-less lift - I have never seen an Egyptian lift which has a door that slides shut - and descended eight floors. As soon as I exited into Midan el-Mahataa, I turned away from noisy Road 9 and headed towards Maadi Degla, passing elegant villas and dust-coated Jacaranda trees but I mostly kept my eyes on the oncoming cars, the patchwork tarmac and piles of rubble to avoid tripping. The whole of Cairo, a grey and beige city, is a perpetual construction site inhabited by myriad stray cats. I thought Maadi Club, with its manicured lawns, co-ed swimming pools and tennis courts was somewhere to my left. The Coptic Church should just be coming up in the next midan and somewhere further down was the British Club, right? I kept walking, skirting potholes and keeping a wary eye on any lurking desert dogs snuffling through the streetside debris.

Suddenly, I heard a creaking noise. A malnourished donkey was pulling an old wooden cart; an old man wearing a deep green galabeeya sat aloft, wielding a thin-

tipped whip. He had a sand-colored cloth wrapped around his head and a date-sized prayer scar emblazoned on his forehead. Unlike other Cairo streets which are teeming with people and automobiles, this street with its modest buildings was empty of cars and there was just one silent woman hurrying down the street. She wore a black naqab, the bottom hem falling just short of the ground and the only opening, a narrow gash across her eyeline. A black-gloved hand tugged at a young child who tried to lean backward to use his slight weight to slow his mother's velocity. He wanted to get a better look. He almost tripped as he twisted his body around to stare and stare. The little boy's long, downy eyelashes refused to blink and as I stubbornly gazed back, I realized why he was so intrigued by me.

I was a woman in a shaabi neighborhood where even more than other areas men own the streets. I am also a woman wearing gym pants that only came to mid-calf. My bare arms are sticking out of a short-sleeved T-shirt and a red bandanna only covers half my head.

I was attired fairly modestly for the cultural time zone of the global gym but now suddenly, here I was, a ten minute walk away and yet in an utterly different cultural time zone.

And I was dressed most inappropriately.

People who write about globalization often describe it as a process of homogenization – all the world becomes the same. This increasing worldwide standardization is trumpeted as the “McDonaldization” of the world by capitalist, U.S.-imperialist triumphalists or uttered despairingly by proponents of diversity and multiculturalism. Alternatively, it is described as a process which incongruously sharpens cultural differences leading to the rise of extreme religious and ethnic nationalisms. Some try to escape this homogeneity-heterogeneity dualism by describing globalization as a process of increasing mixture or hybridization. The triad of global, local or “glocal” is another variation on the same theme. These categories, more often than not, are merely a fancy-dress replication of the hackneyed binary of “modernity” and “tradition” or an attempt to hybridize the two but hybridization only serves to reinforce the dualism of the categories from which it is drawn.

Globalization is an accident-prone term. Although the growth of gyms as we know them today took off in the 1990s just like post-Cold War globalization, in my humble opinion, what happens in the global gym does and does not conform to these theories but I invite the reader to judge for herself...

One dark, bitterly cold evening in December, 2009, I ventured up to Gold’s gym in midtown Manhattan for a class called “Body Combat.” Not just one or two but three instructors for one energy-fuelled, heart-thumping workout! Two months later, I found myself doing the exact same class to the exact same music with the exact same moves

except this time I was in India. As I would eventually discover, I had done Body Combat 42 which is one of the Les Mills choreographed, martial arts-inspired workouts.

Les Mills is a company based in New Zealand that exports pre-packaged, formatted fitness classes to gyms in over 80 countries and boasts over 90,000 instructors. In addition to Body Combat, there is Body Pump (weightlifting), Body Jam (dance), Body Balance (stretch) and so on and so forth. Every three months, they issue a new workout with ten tracks beginning with a warm-up and ending with a cool down. Before I left India at the end of March, 2010, I attended a “master class” in which Body Combat 43 was unveiled. Two master teachers had flown in from Dubai to teach the Indian instructors the new Body Combat choreography so that they in turn could introduce it to their participants. The two masters turned out to be two British women who looked to be in their forties and had the type of muscle-clad bodies which bespeak years of exercise. Six weeks later, I was in Germany when the tattooed instructor with nose, eyebrow, ear and belly piercings informed us with great excitement that she was about to introduce “die neue choreografie,” the new Body Combat “vierunddreizehn” (43). Afterwards she said to me, “It seems that you know it already.”

I smiled and said, “Yes, I think I’ve seen it once before.”

When you climb up the grimy staircase and enter Fitness First’s air-conditioned calm, breathing a sigh of relief that you have made it through Connaught Place’s

cacophony without being run over by a speeding green and yellow autorickshaw, you will be greeted by as many as eight smiling staff members crowded behind the desk. You will immediately realize that you are entering a space which shares a cultural time zone with the Subway sandwich shop downstairs, a franchise that originated in Connecticut. But the Connaught Place Subway is strictly divided into the “veg” and “non-veg” counters because Indians take their vegetarianism ultra seriously. Nearby are other similar cultural time zones like the Barrista and Costa cafés, all of which symbolize one aspect of what people call the (post-1991 economic liberalization) “New India.”

Although Fitness First is based out of the UK, India has a huge population and so what is one person’s job in other places might be shared by half a dozen people in Delhi. For example, when you enter Fitness First in Berlin’s Kurfürstendamm, you will be greeted by one, possibly two, workers because the cost of labor is much higher and the unemployment rate is much lower. Should you choose to use the facilities in Delhi’s immaculate Fitness First, the toilet will be immediately wiped down inside and out by one of five, sari-clad locker room attendants who use nothing but a humble rag, apparently impervious to unpleasant odors. In South Africa’s Planet Fitness gyms, the cleaners usually have toilet brushes. They don’t sit in the locker rooms all day like the ladies in Delhi and in Cairo and in the Y on Court Street in Brooklyn.

How the toilet is cleaned, who cleans it, what they wear when they are cleaning it and what language they speak while they’re having their lunch – and indeed, if they

have a place to have lunch outside the restroom – and how they get home afterwards are all central aspects of the global gym. Does this job represent a once-in-a-lifetime career opportunity or is it the ultimate survivor’s last act of desperation?

In the global gym, physical labor is performed by various actors for various reasons: the cleaners, personal trainers, aerobics instructors and the gym-goers are all there to sweat – some are paid to sweat and others are paying to sweat. These types of physical labor can be described as transnational practices which link the people in one gym to all the others around the globe performing similar actions. But context is key. Do the cleaning ladies shower in the stalls they have so assiduously scrubbed or do they lift weights on the training floor after their shift?

I have never seen the cleaners in Delhi or Cairo or Johannesburg work out in the gym but Wendy, who cleans Eastern Athletic in New York, regularly uses the steam room and takes aerobics classes whenever she can.

“We should do a Hindi song for Body Combat one day.” Anshuman, a 24-year old doctor was talking to Prince, the excellent Body Combat instructor. Both Prince and Anshuman were from Delhi but Prince was the interpreter between the “global” class, Body Combat, and the “local” participant. Although really, “local” is a deceptive term: Anshuman had been on a student exchange to Japan and would soon embark on his first visit to the U.S. to work a hospital rotation and visit his elder brother who lived

there. He was sincerely attached to his iPhone and told me about the Facebook page for fans of Moleskine notebooks.

Prince had just spent the holiday of Holi, for which the gym had closed, watching Bollywood movies and the Hollywood blockbuster, *Avatar*, for the third time instead of throwing water balloons and colored powders at family and friends. Most people at the gym still had green and red smears on their hair and arms but Prince was perfectly turned out as always. He smiled reassuringly at Anshuman and said, “Why don’t you go on lesmills.com and there you can make a suggestion. You can suggest any song you want. Even a Hindi song.”

But what is a Hindi song? Is it some authentic Indian cultural product?

When rapper Psy’s hit “Gangnam Style” went viral on the ‘net, was it a South Korean song? Gangnam is a neighborhood in Seoul much like Beverly Hills in Los Angeles according to the artist who spent four years studying music in the States. Gangnam style refers to a certain type of global cosmopolitanism that is exemplified by the transformation of rap, an African American musical form, into K-pop. Similarly, many popular Hindi songs draw on both “indigenous” and “world” music forms like Hip Hop and Jazz but still, Anshuman has a point. Most Body Combat tracks are Western pop with the occasional painful rock song.

Global classes like Zumba and Body Combat symbolize both the enticement and cynical commodification of global culture(s). Zumba is on offer in 185 countries worldwide according to the website which describes zumba as both a “global movement” and a “way of life.” Zumba instructors are supposed to use 70% “international” music but the definition of international depends on one’s national location. Unlike Les Mills classes, zumba instructors can pick their own music and choreograph their own steps if they so choose, instead of using the music and moves Zumba creates. Hence, it is a more flexible format but because zumba was created by a Colombian immigrant to the U.S., there is usually a large component of booty-jiggling Latin and Caribbean dances. However, because Latin America and the Caribbean have long been at the center of cross-cultural interactions with the arrival of European colonizers and African slaves into an Amerindian environment, most Latin and Caribbean dances were always-already “global.”

Similarly, Les Mills’ Body Combat incorporates elements from myriad martial arts worldwide – from tai chi to karate to Muay Thai to Afro-Brazilian capoeira. The global class that can be done everywhere is made up of many everywhere, offering participants a form of existential travelling.

In my second week at Fitness First, I was leaning against the sweat-steamy mirror recovering from the Body Combat class when Prince came down from the elevated stage where he taught and took off his microphone, “I think you’ve done capoeira before, right?” he asked me.

I looked up at the skylight, two stories above us. People on the training floor could look down into the huge group fitness studio through glass windows on the second floor. Since the gym was opened in 2008, everything is still so new. Finally, I smiled, “Honestly, capoeira is the single most strenuous and challenging thing I have ever attempted to do so I have not exactly done it but I have tried.”

I have attempted capoeira in Salvador da Bahia, Brazil and then again in New York but in neither place with much success. But I did learn a little about the historical and spiritual significance of capoeira. Regardless of whether it’s capoeira angola (slower, more “traditional” and performed closer to the ground) or capoeira regional (faster and incorporating more kicks from the East Asian martial arts) or any of the new capoeira hybrids which are emerging as it gains prominence on the global stage, capoeira is always performed in a “roda fechada,” a closed circle. No-one is allowed to see inside because capoeira was first developed by slaves who told their slave masters that they were dancing, not practicing combat drills, hence capoeira is always accompanied by the thin, tinny music of the berimbau and hearty singing.

Did the five dozen middle-class Indians and the three foreigners who came to Prince’s body combat class on an almost daily basis know that capoeira was outlawed in Brazil until the 1930s? As we were doing the jinga – capoeira’s base move which allows one to transition from defense to offense very rapidly – to a subpar rock song, did they know that capoeira was used by escaped slaves to defend themselves against

plantation owners trying to re-enslave them? Did they know that capoeiristas performing in New York in the 1970s inspired the worldwide breakdance sensation?

Does it matter if they do or if they don't?

"It's a conversation." That's the way capoeira mestres describe "jogando capoeira," playing capoeira.

There is a philosophical possibility offered here. Phenomenological philosophers like Maurice Merleau-Ponty tried to counter the Cartesian mind-body dualism by offering other ways of knowing and especially embodied forms of perceiving the world through the senses.

So even if you are playing capoeira in India in the diluted form of a Les Mills Body Combat class - "unknowingly" - haven't you unwittingly entered the conversation anyway?

I know many Brazilians who are dedicated to yoga, India's export to the world. Many of them travel to India to study it and train their tongues to master the difficult Sanskrit names of various postures (and of course there are skilled and knowledgeable Indian capoeiristas). But many people in Brazil, like other countries, especially when yoga is done in a gym and not a yoga studio, just want to do yoga for physical, not mental or spiritual "fitness."

In fact, Plus One, a U.S. company that specializes in “corporate wellness” and manages the in-house gyms of companies like Goldman Sachs and Barclays Capital, sent an email to all staff saying that “om” and chanting in yoga classes was no longer allowed as that was too “religious.” In 2008, Malaysian imams issued a fatwa that Muslim Malaysians should desist from doing yoga as it was too “Hindu.” These are reminders that the physical and spiritual are often intertwined but their relationship is not straightforward.

Although the yoga class I attended at Fitness First in Delhi was the only class conducted in Hindi, not English, it contained no “om”-ing and chanting. It was definitely more fitness-oriented. Was this practice of yoga, although in India, somehow inauthentic or unfaithful to its history? Authenticity, originality – artifacts of another time?

We live in a world of similes now. They say Beijing is like Washington, D.C. and Shanghai is like New York, Johannesburg is like Los Angeles and Cape Town like San Francisco. American colloquial speech is plagued by an epidemic of “likes” as in “I am, like, so jet lagged.”

I have been an aerobics instructor for over a dozen years. While studying at New York University in 2000, I first started teaching at the NYU gym in order to supplement my student scholarship after becoming certified through ACE (American Council on

Exercise). Now, when I teach zumba, more than when I teach step or kickboxing or boot camp, I try to take my Brooklyn class on a trip around the world by incorporating as many dance forms as possible from flamenco to pagode.

Although I have never studied Irish dance, I decided that in the spirit of continual expansion, I would incorporate an Irish dance into my repertoire. Plus, I had seen an instructor in Cape Town include an Irish dance in his class and I had asked him for the name of the song: “American Wake.” (Yes, from *River Dance*. Go ahead, roll your eyes). Normally, I would go to some classes to at least try to absorb some of the dance’s basic steps but not having the time, I got on YouTube and watched several different clips. I then manufactured a dance based on what I had seen and proudly presented it to my class with the warning that the dance I had created was totally bogus.

This is what French sociologist, Jean Baudrillard, called a “third order simulacrum” – an imitation of an imitation with no actual referent, a symptom of postmodernity and consumerism.

Two weeks later, my pride was shattered when one of my students, a fifteen-year old who had been taking Irish dance lessons since the age of four, showed me some “real” Irish steps.

But I did learn something. Unlike most of the Afrolatin-Caribbean dances we do in zumba, in Irish dance, there is no shimmying and booty-shaking. In fact, one has to

remain straight-backed with clenched fists by the side which is why it is so incredibly difficult. You have to kick your legs but keep the rest of your body absolutely still. “So in case the British looked in the door, they wouldn’t know they were dancing. That’s why you can’t move your upper body at all.” That’s what Mary, my half-Irish student told me. I don’t know if it’s folklore or fact but it sounds a bit like capoeira...So many dances we dance speak back to the oppressions of slavery and colonialism through subversion, sublation because ultimately, we dance to be free.

I search high and low for “original” music – songs never before heard in a zumba class - so I got all excited one night in December, 2011, at salsa night on the Nile Maxim in Cairo when I heard a song I thought would be perfect for my zumba class. The Nile Maxim is a dinner cruise ship that docks behind the Marriott Hotel on the island of Zamalek which is about an eight-minute taxi ride away (with no traffic) from the Midan Tahrir which is now famous worldwide, following Egypt’s revolution of February, 2011 that deposed the dictator Hosni Mubarak. Many of the Egyptians who dance in the “L.A.” style made popular in Cairo by one of the salsa teachers who had spent many years in California could rededicate themselves to Latin dance now that they were not occupying Midan Tahrir anymore.

But pre and post-revolution, like salsa nights in other parts of the world, Cairo salsa nights include merengue and bachata from the Dominican Republic and

sometimes even Angolan quizomba, Argentine tango, cha-cha, West Coast swing, quickstep and other social partner dances which transform sociality in the society they enter. If it is somebody's birthday, there might be a belly dancing number thrown in. You can always tell who the foreigners are at that point.

Outside the Nile flowed silently by the stationary boat but inside the music pulsed at full blast. I was watching one couple in particular because the woman's cream hegab glowed in the darkness and seemed to match her partner's white T-shirt. They both wore jeans and were very trim and they moved as one, snake-like across the floor in the sexy hip-popping bachata two-step and then back to flashy turn patterns for a fast salsa. A veiled Muslim woman dancing with a man who is not her husband is a fairly common sight at Cairo Salsa nights frequented by the upper middle class.

Salsa clubs from New York to Cairo are some of the rare cultural time zones where all ages, races, sizes, ethnicities, nationalities, sometimes even differing social classes etc. are free to speak the international language of Suzy Q's and cross body leads, translating these moves into their own, transforming them, transforming themselves, transforming their societies. Dancing too can be revolutionary. I

But for women especially, even in societies where women barely have a presence in public space, where women and men are rigidly separated in the social sphere, a woman can arrive alone at a salsa venue and leave alone after dancing for hours without being sexually harassed.

On a 48-hour layover in Dubai all by myself, I did not hesitate to buy *Time Out* Dubai and find out where the salsa dancers would be congregating. In Mumbai, my travelling companion had to leave a day early so again I took the train by myself and then an autorickshaw, daring the male-owned streets, to finally arrive into the relative safety of a salsa club where I knew no-one. If people don't know you in salsa clubs, the good dancers won't ask you to dance because they don't want to be saddled for a five-minute-long song with a neophyte shuffling off the beat. In so many ways, salsa clubs break with convention but when it comes to gender, men still usually ask women to dance but I couldn't afford to sit around after travelling so far. I observed the floor for a few minutes and then asked one of the most highly skilled dancers to dance. In New York, you might get a rude and snobbish reply such as, "Can you dance on 2?" which is a more difficult form of musicality than dancing on the 1 which is the downbeat. But in Dubai and Mumbai, fortunately, the men were more polite and so, I danced the night away...

Abruptly, the music changed to a vibrant zouk song with a compelling beat from the French Antilles. The whole dance floor at the Nile Maxim suddenly began to do a choreographed routine that they had clearly been practicing for some time. It was a glorified version of the electric slide but they were so synchronized, it felt like an old episode of *Fame* or a Bollywood movie in which everyone "spontaneously" starts singing and dancing. I loved it! Not knowing the steps, I clapped along.

Afterwards, I approached the DJ to ask him what song it was and he directed me to Mr. White T-shirt who kindly told me I could find the MP3 on his Facebook page. What a find! The next day, I downloaded the song and immediately began choreographing a new “original” warm-up number for my zumba class. But then I suddenly became suspicious. I went on to YouTube and entered the song’s name. There was not one but several zumba choreographies to the exact same song. Instructors from Stuttgart to Atlanta had posted their choreographies. Thwarted again!

The scholar John Tomlinson, drawing on several other theorists, describes the “cultural condition of globalization” as one of “deterritorialization” in which the “place-culture relationship” is totally transformed. On my first trip to Egypt, I had spent harassing hours trawling through the alleys of Khan-el-Khalili market, bargaining with vendors for their wares, all in an effort to bring my university friends in New York something authentically Egyptian. I spent hours carefully packing miniature perfume bottles made of delicate colored glass and fragile incense oil burners, only to get back to Brooklyn and find that the Egyptian stores on Atlantic Avenue, a ten minute walk from my house, had all the same stuff!

I am a moron.

The hardest class I have ever taken, with the exception of capoeira, was taught by a heavily pregnant woman in the Flatbush area of Brooklyn in May, 2006. I had received a call from a man named Mike who needed a temporary replacement for his best instructor as she was about to give birth. The whole community would soon relocate to the Jersey shore for the summer but he needed someone for the interim. We agreed that I would attend one of her classes before she went on leave so that I was familiar with her teaching style: "They love her!" he told me, "I don't know how you'll replace her."

Not feeling at all pressured, I took the F train to Avenue P in Flatbush which I had thought was a Caribbean neighborhood but when I entered the gym, I did not see any black people. In fact, as I would find out the next day, I was in the Jewish part of Flatbush, home to the Sephardic community of Syrian Jews who are quite religious, hence the "ladies only" classes. But despite this, most ladies in the class had their hair hidden under headscarves.

The instructor who was literally barefoot and extremely pregnant put on the music and handed me a 6lbs medicine ball. We began a series of lunges and squats and push-ups and jacks and more lunges, squats, push-ups with the medicine ball under one hand, then the other, jacks and now knee lifts, now plyometrics, now more lunges holding the medicine ball aloft! The instructor, despite her watermelon-sized belly which in principle should have reduced her balance and lung capacity, performed all the exercises without pause.

I pride myself on being a tough instructor. I began teaching the 20-year olds at NYU gym who were not that interested in really exerting themselves but I soon got my second job at a small gym in my neighborhood in Brooklyn. Park Slope residents are famous for their reproductive powers and suddenly, I was faced with an entirely different population. My new students were American and European Park Slope moms in their thirties and forties who had a single-minded devotion to regaining their youthful figures after having two or three kids. They were determined to emulate Madonna's stunning example and I had had to hone my skills accordingly hence my classes had become a belly-banishing, booty-slamming extravaganza.

But now here I was, unable to keep up with this Superhero Instructor who was eight months pregnant! At the end of the class, awe-struck and breathless, I asked her if this was her first baby. She looked to be in her late twenties. She shook her head, "No, the sixth."

A train ride away and a whole different cultural time zone. The next day, when I returned to that of Park Slope, I replicated her class as best I could except we didn't have medicine balls so we used light dumbbells instead.

In that way, I incorporated her moves into my own vocabulary and now I can no longer differentiate between hers and mine.

Whatever is happening in the society outside will be reflected in the gym, sometimes remade, sometimes unmade. What happens in the global gym might transcend the gym's borders and who knows what might happen then? Hierarchies of age, gender, race, class, caste etc. might be leveled in the gym or reinforced but unlike with social media, there's still a chance that you may sweat with someone in the gym whom you would never encounter anywhere else.

I remember one frosty evening in June, 2011 when I ventured to Virgin Active, Old Ed's in Houghton, one of Johannesburg's most elite suburbs for a Latin-inspired dance class. About half the participants were "born-frees," those born after South Africa's first democratic elections in 1994. At least four-fifths of the class was white and the teacher, who had the figure of a "typical" black South African woman i.e. high-bosomed and high-waisted with a large, curvaceous derriere, was exhorting the students to dance with more vavoom. She kept prancing around the class clapping her hands and whistling and saying, "Woza, woza! Dance, man. Heysh. You're dancing like you're in Houghton. I want to see you dancing like you are in Soweto, man. Move your hips! Woza!" Presumably, people in Soweto, the black township on the outskirts of Johannesburg, performed Latin dance better than the people in "white" Houghton (although Nelson "Madiba" Mandela did have a home there, it is still a mostly white suburb).

I sympathized with what she was trying to do although I remembered the time I had had the exact opposite experience. In June, 2001, ten years earlier, I had returned

home to Zimbabwe, the country I had grown up in and called all the gyms in Harare to tell them I was now an aerobics instructor and wanted to guest teach a “Latin Aerobics” class. I had gone to Rolfe Valley, an upper middle class suburb, to teach the middle-aged white ladies, sometimes derogatorily known as Rhodies (those who still identified with Rhodesia/pre-independence Zimbabwe). I threw all the samba and salsa moves I had learnt in Brazil and New York at them. I was still a novice instructor then which is my way of saying that I wasn’t very good but they were! They followed the moves beautifully.

The next week I went across town to a mostly black, lower middle class gym and tried to teach middle-aged black ladies the same steps. They couldn’t follow me at all or more correctly, they wouldn’t – “It’s so unladylike!” Most of them had never been exposed to Latin dance before and could not contextualize the moves, they were embarrassed and ashamed. There is a conservative form of very strait-laced Christianity still pervasive in contemporary Zimbabwe that was introduced by the missionaries in the late nineteenth-century and led to the demonization of traditional Zimbabwean dances as too pagan and sexualized.

Swiveling your hips, shimmying your shoulders: these can all be radical in certain contexts.

Maybe if it had been a “ladies only” class like the one in Flatbush, Brooklyn or the one in Maadi, Cairo, the women might have felt less inhibited?

In Berlin, I had been surprised to find that – unlike in Delhi – there were not only Fitness First gyms for both men and women but also several Fitness First Ladies Only. I asked why they had so many and the German manager told me, “It’s for our Turkish ladies but our German ladies, too, like it.” And they did! Although German society is so liberal that at Fitness First both men and women shared the sauna, some even quasi-nude, many German women did seem to prefer Fitness First Ladies Only.

I remember a conversation overheard in the locker room at Gold’s gym in Maadi, a woman wearing hegab was talking to the group fitness manager, Jailan, an Egyptian woman in her thirties who didn’t veil. The woman was asking for more ladies only classes and Jailan was explaining that there were more foreigners at Maadi branch than at Dokki branch so she did not want to prevent men from attending classes here. She smiled kindly and put her hand on the woman’s covered forearm, “Why not take Aicha’s belly dancing class?”

Aicha is six feet tall and more dark-skinned than the average Egyptian because of her Senegalese father. Beautiful and stylish, her hegab always matches her street clothes perfectly but when she comes into the aerobics studio, she closes the door behind her and locks it. The curtains have been replaced by opaque glass so no-one in the corridor outside can see inside the suddenly-transformed studio where ladies can remove their hegabs, turtlenecks and sneakers if they so choose. Some tie scarves with jangling coins around their hips or wear tight skirts or even daringly reveal their

abdomens. Here we are among women and now, let the serious business of belly dancing begin...

And again, I am wearing a baggy T-shirt, calf-length gym pants and sneakers – too unsexy for this supremely sensual dance, the ultimate celebration of the female form – but straight afterwards I am going to spin class. I am wearing the cultural uniform of spinning.

If you are what you eat, are you how you exercise? If so, spinning surely symbolizes the American Protestant work ethic?

Spin class, like the majority of classes at this gym (except for Aicha's which is mostly in Arabic), will be primarily taught in English even though tonight we have an Egyptian instructor. Her long hair is all down her back in a professionally-streaked tangle of curls and her low-cut top reveals impressive cleavage as she leans forward on her bike which is set on a stage facing us. This class is half men and half women. The hard saddle is painful but I diligently peddle away. I wave at Aicha as she exits the gym, back in her white jacket and matching hegab. She is preparing to leave the cultural time zone of the global gym, an inter- and cross-cultural place where people enter into conversations with their bodies, where contradictions inhere but where endless possibilities possibilify...

Finally, spin class is over and it's now January, 2014. "Shukran. Ma'salemma," I say on my way out. Curly-haired Ahmed waves at me, "Ma'salemma. Bah-bye. See you tomorrow, inschallah." And I reply, "Inschallah."

Part of me would like to walk back to the flat. I have to think up some new choreographies for my zumba students for when I return to Brooklyn – they want to add Israeli line dancing and a South African kwela dance. But I will not walk tonight. Not because I cannot read the street signs in Arabic, not because of "security concerns" even though now, after the revolution, everyone is much more cautious as the police presence has been greatly reduced and the crime rate is up.

Not because it's dark and cold now.

No, I will take a taxi because I am exhausted!